

Essay for the Friends No. 21

Canon Woolmore Wigram, M.A., Belfry Reform, and *Change-Ringing Disentangled*

By John Eisel

Background

One of the most vocal of the supporters of belfry reform in the nineteenth century, he was the fifth son, and sixth child, of Money Wigram, Esq. His father's name was appropriate, as he was much involved in shipyards and evidently was very wealthy, and in the 1830s serving for a year as a director of the Bank of England. In Money Wigram bought the estate of Moor Place, Much Hadham, Herts., where he lived until he died in 1873. Five years later the estate was sold and passed out of the family. This Grade I-listed house, with many ancillary buildings with development potential and 166 acres, has recently been on the market, the guide price being £10,000,000, but is now sold.

Woolmore Wigram, the subject of this essay, was born on 29 October 1831, went to Rugby School in 1844, and then on to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he matriculated in 1850. He gained his B.A. in 1854 and proceeded M.A. in 1858. Meanwhile, in 1855, he had taken Holy Orders, and served as a curate in Hampstead from until 1864: in the latter year he was preferred to the living of Brent Pelham with Pelham Fumeaux, where he ministered until 1876. He then became rector of St. Andrew's with St. Nicholas and St. Mary's, Hertford, and in 1886, during his incumbency, he became an honorary canon of St. Alban's Cathedral. He retired from Hertford in 1897 and the following year he moved to St. Alban's, where he lived until his death on 19 January 1907. He was buried in the churchyard at St. Stephen's, St. Albans.

Non-Parochial Activities

Evidently Woolmore Wigram was an active man, and during the period 1858 to 1868 he was a member of the Alpine Club, and he was distinguished in his climbing. How he managed to fit this in with his

parochial duties is not clear. He was also a keen change ringer, if not particularly skilled, and later evidence suggests that he may well have learnt while he was at Cambridge in the early 1850s. In 1871 he published a series of papers on how to learn the art, which appeared in the periodical *Church Bells* over some 20 weeks, between 25 March and 19 August 1871, although with three gaps where material was held over because of lack of space. Perhaps because of these articles, in 1871 Wigram was elected a member of the Ancient Society of College Youth. While the articles were appearing, C.A.W. Troyte published, in the issue of 5 August 1871, a letter raising a query about phraseology, with a correction the following week. Wigram responded on 19 August 1871 and the final letter in the series, from Troyte, appeared a week later. During the correspondence, Wigram acknowledged the help given by Troyte's book, *Change Ringing*, which had been published in 1869. (For a discussion of this text and its various editions, see *Essay for the Friends*, No. 4 (February 1997), and Update (January 1998).)

At the end of the last of the series of papers, published on 19 August 1871, it was noted that 'The Author, having obtained the requisite permission, proposes to re-publish this series of papers immediately, of which further notice will appear.' The completed book, cost 2s., was advertised in *Church Bells* on 21 October 1871, only two months later, and further adverts appeared in the *Cambridge Chronicle* on 4 & 25 November 1871. The book was aimed at beginners in the art, and dealt with the practicalities of ringing on five and six bells. It was dedicated, not too surprisingly, to the Rev. H.T. Ellacombe. Methods which were discussed were Grandsire and Stedman Doubles, Plain Bob, Treble Bob, Oxford Bob and Court Bob Minor.

How well the book sold is not easy to answer, but it was still being advertised in *Church Bells* early in 1880. However, it had been rendered out of date by the publication, late in 1879, of Jasper Snowdon's *Ropesight*. Snowdon had been asked to recommend a textbook for a band of learners, the only ones available being that written by Troyte and *Change-Ringing Disentangled*. Snowdon realised the shortcomings of both of these books, and quickly wrote and published his own. Received from the printers in November 1879, the print run of 500 was sold out by April 1880. This would have made the first edition of Wigram's book unsaleable, and it is not surprising that Wigram produced a second edition of his book later in 1880, again

dedicated to the Rev. H.T. Ellacombe. In this the text was completely revamped, and extended to ringing on eight bells, but confining the methods discussed to Plain Bob and Grandsire. The book concluded with remarks on towers and on ringing, the latter section including strong remarks against prize ringing. Sales may not have compared with those of *Ropesight*, and from 3 November 1883 the book was advertised every week in *Bell News*, in competition with the third edition of *Ropesight*. It was still in print many years later, and my personal copy of the second edition has, bound in the back and in the original binding, George Bell and Sons' catalogue of educational works, published in December 1895.

The Belfry Reform Movement

In parallel with his campanological writings, Wigram was actively promoting ringing in his alma mater, a long letter to that end appearing in the *Cambridge Chronicle* on 28 October 1871. The first full paragraph went thus:

'Change-ringing may be considered (1) as a scientific amusement; (2) as a means of bringing together men of different ranks, and of affording opportunities for good influence; (3) one of the manifold branches of Church-work; and it is in every respect worthy of a high place in our estimation.'

This theme was developed at length, essentially the principles of belfry reform. A shortened version of this letter appeared in the Preface to Banister's *The Art and Science of Change Ringing* (1874).

This seed clearly fell on fertile ground, as 2 December 1871 a letter appeared in the *Cambridge Chronicle* from 'A BELLRINGING UNDERGRAD' who asked if there were enough members of the university who could ring a bell and who could be brought together to practise. He asked that their names should be sent to the *Cambridge Chronicle*, to which the editor gladly agreed. This clearly spurred Wigram on, and a long letter appeared a week later, outlining some of the history of ringing in Cambridge, in particular the activities of the Cambridge Youths, and including the old chestnut about Stedman producing his principle there about the year 1640, and concluding:

'In addressing to residents, whether of Town or University, this appeal for increased support to the science, I can assure them all that as a recreation,

it combines intellectual amusement with physical exercise, full but not laborious. To the future clergy, I say, that parish priest who understands change-ringing is able to take the control of the tower—a portion of the fabric whose sanctity is not always remembered; and besides, he possesses an element of much usefulness in his parochial work with young men. To the laity anxious for Church work, I say, if you ring you can take a part in the services, as well as that of the organist, although frequently and so strangely neglected. I venture to refer those interested to my letter in your paper of October 28th, and to the little book mentioned in your advertising columns. I will do my best to give any further information to those who may like to write to me.'

The 'Little book' was, of course, *Change-Ringing Disentangled!* As a P.S. he added the wish that any recruits would associate themselves with the existing society, saying that 'The Vicar of St. Mary's is a member, so also is Mr. Rockett, the Custos of the Tower.' A positive note was struck by the editor, who informed the 'Bell-ringing Undergraduate' that a letter awaited him at the *Chronicle* office. Unfortunately nothing came of this, and it was not until 1879 that a ringing association was formed, first as the Clare Association of Ringers and then renamed as the Cambridge University Guild.

In 1876 Wigram had an opportunity to bring his views to a wider audience. At the last session of the Church Congress that took place at the Guildhall, Plymouth, on 6 October 1876, he read a paper in which he expressed his views. He was followed by C.A.W. Troyte, Esq, who spoke along similar lines and took the opportunity to bewail the fact that Exeter Cathedral bells were not in a fit state for change ringing (not remedied until 1902). We may suspect that Wigram got rather carried away, as the report that appeared in *The Times* on 10 October 1876, in describing Troyte's talk, stated that he 'quietly read a paper', perhaps inferring that the previous paper was not so quiet!

Wigram was keen to use change-ringing as the means of introducing belfry reform, which he did when he became rector of St. Andrew's in Hertford. At that time ringing in Hertford was at a low ebb, the Hertford College Youths, founded in 1767 and based at All Saints', Hertford, being effectively moribund, and had been so for a good many years — an attempt to revive it had been made in 1857, reported in the *Hertford Mercury* on 16 & 23 May 1857, but this was unsuccessful. In 1875-6 the tower at St. Andrew's was rebuilt, and the ring of eight bells reinstalled. In 1876 a new society was formed there, called the Hertford

Change-Ringers, with Wigram as President, and in 1879 the bells were rehung by Mr. Gray, of Little Munden, Herts. At a meeting on 9 December 1879 the Hertford Change-Ringers were recognised as the ringing society for the whole town, and added the title 'Hertford College Youths' to their own name: in the second edition of Wigram's book their rules were used as an example of what such rules should be. Some progress was made in the art, and a quarter peal of Grandsire Triples was rung at St. Andrew's, Hertford, on 20 May 1881, by members of the society, with Wigram ringing the fourth bell. In the same year the rump of the old society — five in number, three of whom had joined the newer society and two who had given up ringing — dissolved the old society and its handbells were bought and held by trustees on behalf of the new society, and also the records and peal book were transferred to the trustees.

Progress was evidently made by the newer society, and in February 1882 a peal of Grandsire Triples was rung at All Saints' church, conducted by H.J. Tucker, from Bishop's Stortford. Six members of the band were ringing their first peal, and the eighth had been a member of the former society. Wigram did not take part in this peal, and his first peal came a little later, for which see below. The date of the peal is uncertain — the report in *Bell News* states that it took place on 20 February 1882, whereas the write-up in North and Stahlschmidt's *Church Bells of Hertfordshire* gives the date as 21 February 1882.

Establishment of the Hertford County Association

At this period there was a move to create a diocesan association of bellringers, the diocese of St. Albans having been created in 1877. The diocese included the territory of the Essex Association, but that association would not transform into a diocesan association, leaving the way open for an association for Hertfordshire. This was formed at a meeting held in St. Albans on 29 October 1884, and it comes as no surprise that Wigram became secretary. The first peal for the new Hertford County Association was one of Grandsire Triples, rung at St. Andrew's, Hertford, on 28 February 1885. It is, perhaps, a little surprising that the rector did not take part in this special peal on the bells of his own church. Although an annual meeting of the Hertford

County Association was advertised to be held in St. Albans on 7 November 1887, at which Canon Wigram intended to tender his resignation, there is some doubt as to whether it took place, as no report was published. At a meeting held at Hatfield on 16 June 1888, presided over by Canon Wigram, E.P. Debenham, who was acting as temporary secretary, was confirmed in the office, and it was agreed that Squire Proctor should be asked to be President. Squire Proctor held the office until his death in 1895, when it was left vacant until Canon Wigram was elected in 1897.

Peal Weeks

One important innovation that happened in the 1880s was the introduction of the peal week, where a company got together, and attempted several peals over a short period of time. Wigram was the institutor of such weeks, which were soon taken up by others, and the first, based in Hertford, was held in 1884. It comes as no surprise that the Rev. F.E. Robinson was involved, and during the course of the week, on 11 November 1884 Wigram rang his first peal, Stedman Triples at St. Andrew's, Hertford. Other peal weeks were held, based in Hertford, all involving F.E.R., in 1885, 1886, 1888 (spring and autumn), 1889, and 1892. During these Wigram rang a number of peals, the majority of Stedman Triples but also Double Norwich Court Bob Major (first at Hunsdon on 10 February 1888), and Superlative Surprise Major (at St. Andrew's, Hertford, on 21 November 1889). Of the latter peal, Robinson, in *Among the Bells*, comments that it was 'a very able piece of conducting.' The conductor was J.W. Washbrook, and the inference was that the conductor need to be able! Bill Butler, in history of the Oxford Guild, tells us that the Rev. (later Canon) whose first peal on an inside bell in the method it was, recorded in his peal book as 'the worst peal in which I took part.' Wigram's reputation as a poor striker is still part of belfry lore today and it is worth noting that of the peals I have been able to trace, he rang the fourth bell in all but one.

After the first peal week in 1884, these became quite popular, particularly with Robinson, and an article on him, published in *Bell News* on 24 December 1892, records that at that time he had taken part in twelve such weeks. It is worth noticing that more than half of these had been based on Hertford.

Wigram died in January 1907 and a short obituary appeared in the Hertford County Association annual report for that year, although it does not go into much detail on Wigram's ringing career. Nor did anything other than a short note of his death appear in *Bell News*. His memoirs were edited by his wife, and published in 1908, and a copy of this, together with a number of ringing books, was given to the library of the Hertford County Association.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Alan Glover, for abstracting much material from *Church Bells*, and for sending scans of relevant material.



THE REVEREND WOOLMORE WIGRAM, M.A.

A line-engraving of the Rev. Woolmore Wigram that appeared, with a short memoir, in the issue of *Church Bells* of 18 October 1879.

Change-Ringing Disentangled :

WITH

HINTS ON THE DIRECTION OF BELERIES, AND
ON THE MANAGEMENT OF BELLS.

BY THE

REV. WOOLMORE WIGRAM, M.A.

OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE;

VICAR OF GREAT FULHAM WITH FURNACE FULHAM, HERTFORDSHIRE.

A MEMBER OF THE ANCIENT SOCIETY OF COLLEGE YOUTH, LONDON.

'Who rings this bell
Let him take well
To hands, and heads, and hearts.
Ye hands for work,
Ye heads for wits,
Ye hearts for merrynesse.'

'We'll do our best
To call God's folk to prayer and praise
To tell their rest.'

LONDON :

BELL & DALDY, YORK ST. COVENT GARDEN.

1871.

The title page of the first edition of *Change-Ringing Disentangled*.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
ON THE BELLS AND THE MEN.	
Preface. Chapters I. II. XVIII. XIX.	vii. 1, 2, 34, 83
TABULAR STATEMENT OF METHODS	xi
EXPLANATIONS AND PRELIMINARY MATTER.	
Chapters I.-VII. Postscript	1-9, 41
THREE AND FOUR BELL-RINGING.	
Chapter VIII. IX.	11
FIVE-BELL RINGING: THE GRANDSIRE METHOD.	
Chapters X. XIV.	13, 80
" " STEDMAN'S PRINCIPLE.	
Chapters XII. XV.	20, 23
SIX-BELL RINGING: THE BOB METHOD.	
Chapter XI.	14
" " THE TREBLE BOB METHOD.	
Chapter XIII.	25
" " THE OXFORD BOB METHOD.	
Chapter XVI.	33
" " THE COURT BOB METHOD.	
Chapter XVII.	34
POSTSCRIPT AND BELL LITERATURE	
Appendix	41

The contents page of the first edition of *Change-Ringing Disentangled*, showing the ambitious nature of the contents.

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OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE;
RECTOR OF ST. ANDREW, WITH ST. NICHOLAS AND ST. MARY, HERTFORD;
VICAR DEAN OF HERTFORD;
A MEMBER OF THE ANCIENT SOCIETY OF COLLEGE YOUTH.

Second Edition.

LONDON:
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1880.

The title page of the second edition of *Change-Ringing Disentangled*.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
TAULULAR STATEMENT OF METHODS	xi
ON THE TOWER AND THE BELLS :	
CHAPTERS I. II.	1-4
" XX. XXI.	94-97
EXPLANATIONS AND PRELIMINARY MATTER :	
CHAPTERS III.-V.	4-11
" X. XI.	24-30
HUNTING, PLACE-MAKING, AND DODGING :	
CHAPTERS VI.-IX.	11-24
HAND-BELLS AND THE STUDY OF RINGING, ETC. :	
CHAPTERS X. XI.	24-30
RINGING ON THREE AND ON FOUR BELLS :	
CHAPTERS XII. XIII.	30-36
RINGING ON FIVE BELLS, GRANDSIRE DOUBLES, AND ITS VARIATIONS :	
CHAPTERS XIV. XV.	36-51
RINGING ON SIX BELLS, BOB MINOR :	
CHAPTER XVI.	51

The content of the second edition of *Change-Ringing Disentangled* has less in the way of methods, but much wider general coverage.

	PAGE
RINGING ON SEVEN BILLS, GRANDSIRE TRIPLES :	
CHAPTER XVII.	66
RINGING ON EIGHT BELLS, BOB MAJOR :	
CHAPTER XVIII.	83
ON RAISING AND FALLING IN PEAL :	
CHAPTER XIX.	91
RULES FOR A SOCIETY OF RINGERS :	
CHAPTER XX.	94
ON THE CARE OF THE CHURCH TOWER, THE	
BELFRY, ETC. ETC. :	
CHAPTER XXI.	97
ON THE RINGERS AND RINGING :	
CHAPTER XXII.	109

Because of the wider coverage, the contents page of the second edition of *Change-Ringing Disentangled* ran over onto a second page.